

The Right Angle or Degree of Bias?

Robert J. Diehl
University Laboratory High School, Urbana
Teacher: Steve Rayburn

Should you trust the media to report the news accurately? Do you think that they are impartial in their coverage of events? Today, the media is often accused of being biased in its reporting. For an example, “Al-Jazeera” reports on Middle East events and is charged with being prejudiced against the United States, portraying American soldiers in Iraq as villains. In contrast, “Fox News” is accused of being biased toward the Allied occupation in Iraq, portraying the soldiers as heroes. Even long ago, however, bias existed in the media. On November 13, 1909, in the small town of Cherry, Illinois, there was a fire in the local coal mine. The tragedy instantly became headlines around the country. Comparing the coverage of this event by three Midwest newspapers--The *Chicago Tribune* and two labor papers, *The Union Leader* and *the Socialist Democratic Herald*—shows that the reporting was shaped by the political beliefs and goals of each newspaper’s owner.

On November 13, 1909, in a coal mine in Cherry, Illinois, a kerosene torch set fire to a cart full of hay. The fire quickly spread throughout the mine. In the first hours, many miners died and few escaped. A group of approximately eighty miners was trapped in a small area deep within the mine for eight days before being rescued by a search party. In all, 259 men and boys were killed. This mine accident remains the third deadliest in United States history.

The *Chicago Tribune* was the premier newspaper in the Midwest. Its owners were known to have a conservative views on political issues and were strongly anti-union. This

was typical of large city newspapers at the time, as progressive views received little support in the mainstream media. This bias appears subtly in coverage of the Cherry Mine disaster. The *Tribune* emphasized the people who died and the heroes who tried to save the trapped miners. The focus was on just this incident, and not on any other mine accidents. *The Union Leader*, on the other hand, was a labor newspaper in Chicago at this time. It was owned by a pro-labor group, whose purpose was to increase union membership and improve labor's working conditions. It was hostile toward the mine companies. The paper was a weekly publication; hence by the time the first edition came out after the disaster, the main details of the story were widely known. Therefore, the paper did not have to provide basic information about the incident. The paper used the incident to rant about the dangerous working conditions of all laborers, not just miners. Very little of the story was devoted to the actual mine disaster. There was nothing about heroics or the rescue, only the deaths of the miners and the children orphaned or women widowed by the disaster. *The Social Democratic Herald* was another labor paper, started by a founder of the United States Social Party. This paper framed the story as a typical incident of a company killing its workers to save money. It emphasized the gruesome deaths of the miners, even giving a fictional sketch of what it was like for the miners trapped in the mine. The mine owner was portrayed as being concerned only with how much money it would cost to reopen the mine.

Who was really at the fault for the fire? A state investigation into the incident does not assign blame to anyone. The responsibility according to the newspapers, however, lies with different parties. The *Tribune* did not say the company was to blame, but rather an individual. It was claimed in the paper that "some individual or individuals .

. . were negligent.” It speculated that a mine official might be at fault, but it also said that he most likely died trying to rescue his workers. This puts a good face on the company while shifting the blame away from it. The *Tribune* did not criticize the company at all in its coverage. Furthermore, the paper said, “the equipment of the Cherry Mine was supposed to be the equal or superior of that of any other mine in the state.” The *Tribune* also described all the achievements of the mine in the past. The implication is that this was a safe mine.

The Union Leader implied that companies are always to blame in such incidents. It portrayed the mine company owners as heartless people who were more concerned about money than the lives of their workers. *The Herald* headlines shows its prejudice: “Miners Die Horribly from Capitalist Greed.” *The Herald* also reported the mine to be a “death trap,” having open torches because the people in charge refused to repair the electrical system. Rather than giving credit to the company for pouring water down the mine shaft to put out the fire, the paper censured the company for drowning the workers trapped underground. It also chastised the company for sealing the mine to prevent further damage.

The *Tribune* was concerned with selling newspapers, and it tended to emphasize the gripping stories of heroes and tragedy. It was not going to report anything that was pro-labor. Therefore, it put its own spin on the story, which is that Cherry Mine disaster was a rare event. The two labor papers were weekly papers whose purpose was to help workers. They did not report the major details of the story, but instead accentuated information that made the company look bad as well as the larger problem of people being injured in the industry. [From The *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 13, and Nov. 23, 1909;

Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, Report on the Cherry Mine Disaster; Robert McChesney, e-mail to Student Historian, Jan. 6, 2005; Robert McChesney and Ben Scott, "Introduction," in Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism*; *The Social Democratic Herald*, Nov. 20 1909; *The Social Democratic Herald*, Nov. 20, 1909; and Karen Tintori, *Trapped; The 1909 Cherry Mine Disaster*.]